DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 366 257 HE 027 099

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TITLE Action Research and Teaching Professors
PUB DATE [87]
NOTE 15p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Action Research; College Faculty; *College Instruction; Evaluation Methods; Higher Education; *Instructional Improvement; *Research Methodology; *Student Development; *Teacher Improvement; Theory Practice Relationship

ABSTRACT

This paper argues for the use of action research in improving the effectiveness of teaching by professors and briefly discusses the reasons why this is important. The paper stresses that if the purpose of education is student development, then teachers should also be developing in their chosen field of service. Action research helps bring faculty and students together in the teaching/learning process and lets both the professor and the student evaluate its effectiveness. In fact, in order for action research to be critical or emancipatory, students and professors should co-determine the ends of the research and whether these ends are met. This creates a single entity out of the researchers and those being researched. Action research then can become an explicit aspect of a course, with the mutual determination of ends/objectives and their successful completion. (GLR)

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Action Research and Teaching Professors

My teaching college has one explicit research oriented aspect to its role mission: "research related to instruction". Although many of us "over worked" teaching professors see research as an "add on", research into our own effectiveness is critical to our professional lives.

It is typical to divide research into two broad domains, quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative approaches are associated with statistics, "hard" data, and the correlation of human behavior in terms of ordinal, interval, or ratio scales. Qualitative approaches are associated with ethnographies, interpretive techniques, and "soft" data. Occasionally "action research" is considered a third, "ultra" soft, approach. As one of my colleagues stated, "They didn't prepare a decent research design, so they called it action research."

A Focus on Purpose

As defined herein, action research is not a third type, but rather focuses research to a specific purpose. This purpose is to change behavior, to alter action, to cause development to occur, in the problem under study and in the researcher(s). A critical factor in action research is to maximize the meaningfulness of the study. The research design should fit the best notions of validity, external and internal, and may be either qualitative or quantitative, or a combination thereof. The difference between action research, and most research published in academic journals,

is that the results of the research are intended to directly feedback to the researchers' practice. In other words, action research is intended to advise the researcher how to act, more than how to advise others to act. Its main emphasis is on improving the human condition in a specific context, with secondary attention given to generalizing that context to other, similar, contexts.

We know why teaching professors don't do much research; we are overwhelmed with producing teaching. But why don't the flagship university professors produce action research? One reason is that it is "safer" to study others' behavior than your own, it lowers one's responsibility to make significant changes in one's own practice. However, this approach is a form of "distancing", which is a disservice to society (cf. Argyris, 1980; Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985). As a practical example: I work in teacher education. There is a plethora of data-based journals in education, but teachers seldom read them. The questions/hypotheses addressed in the journals often are not the questions teachers are wondering about; they are questions that teacher researchers are wondering about, and teachers seldom find any concrete advice about how to improve their practice in these journals.

Reasons for Teaching Professors to produce Action Research

First of all, nearly all teachers do engage in some action research. Simply giving students an exercise, or test, and then reflecting on the professor's role in the outcome provides informal

feedback that can impact practice. To be convincing to the consumers of action research (ourselves, our students, other teaching professors, other students, etc.), it is important to design research studies that have convincing internal and external validity.

The Golden Rule. In the classic essay "Development as the aim of education" (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972), Kohlberg makes a sound argument that the purpose of education is development. If we, as professors, expect our students to develop, should we not be developing as well? And particularly, should we not be developing in our chosen field of service, professing, teaching, and facilitating learning and development?

Truth, Valid knowledge. The production of knowledge always serves some interest (Habermas, 1971), and the most valid human knowledge needs to serve the interests of those who form the questions of the research. Action research is a critical component in bringing faculty and students together in a "real" democratic enterprise of learning (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). "Objective" knowledge can be produced that lets both the professor and the student know they were effective in teaching and learning.

Professional Status. As argued elsewhere (Diessner, 1992), the requirements for professional status are: a) to be involved in choosing the "ends" of one's practice, and b) then making/having the opportunity to evaluate the success of one's "means" of attaining those ends. Action research is required to produce valid

evaluation.

I hope this research can be done within a Teaching Professor's load, especially if realistically encouraged by peers, administrators, and students. Action research can become an explicit aspect of a course, in which students are involved with the professor in co-determining the some objectives of the course and setting guidelines to know if the those ends/objectives are successful. The setting and measuring of those guidelines leads to a cycle of action research.

Modeling a Democratic Society. In fact, to be critical or emancipatory action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), the researcher and the researched become relatively synonymous. Students and professors shall co-determine the "ends" of the research, and the "means" to attain it, along with mutually deciding what will be convincing proof that the "ends" were attained or not (evaluative aspect of action research). Thus the line between researcher and researched blurs, leaving all significant parties as participants: not an observer and the observed, not the subjector and the subjects.

Call for Action

This plea for action research is not new; Corey in 1949, from Teachers College, urged us to move from "fundamental research" to action research, because teachers weren't consuming research. But the problem isn't just among educators. Even among social scientists studying social issues, reports of action research are

relatively rare. This is why Deutsch (1969) and Sanford (1970), invoking Kurt Lewin, have begged for action research to be the mode of study reported in the Journal of Social Issues. So let's buck the system that discourages little research from teaching professors, as well as the system that encourages basic research that doesn't directly lead to human improvement, and perform action research with our students.

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